DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 165 605 HE 010 863

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TITLE Older Students and Graduate Schools.
INSTITUTION Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 6p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; *Admission Criteria; *Adult Students; Age Groups; *College Admission; Comparative Analysis; *Graduate Students; Higher Education; Interviews; *Nontraditional Students; Questionnaires; Student Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS Graduate Record Examination Background Quest

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to identify older graduate student applicants and the graduate school selection process. Older students were operationally defined as over age 30 or those who received their baccalaureate degree eight or more years ago. Information about the characteristics of older graduate students was obtained from the Graduate Record Examination Background Questionnaire. About 15 percent, or 37,000, of the individuals in the data set were over 30, but only about half of these individuals received their baccalaureate degree in 1967 or before. The older applicants differed from younger students in several respects: there are more women than men in the older group; older applicants were more likely to have previously attended graduate school; older applicants are less likely to be undecided about their field of graduate study; and older applicants are more likely to select career-oriented fields than younger students. About 50 interviews of graduate school departments around Washington, D. C.; Los Angeles, California; Boston, Massachusetts; and Chicago, Illinois revealed that few departments had experimented with alternative methods to select graduate students, despite a realization that the older students are not well served by the traditional criteria. (SW)

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Older Students and Graduate Schools

Our research sought to investigate, in a preliminary fashion, issues related to the admission of older students to graduate schools. Specifically, we sought to investigate:

1) Who are the older applicants, and

2) How graduate schools select them.

The project was funded by the Graduate Record Examiniation Board, motivated by their concern that the GRE be as responsive as possible to the needs of graduate schools and potential graduate students. Although the research for this study has been completed, the final report has not yet been published.

There are 2 phases to the study. The first phase sought to answer the "who are the older applicants question?" By reviewing the data collected from the GRE Background Questionnaire, students registering for the GRE are asked to complete this questionnaire that provides information for research such as degree intentions, intended field of study and previous grad school experience. Older applicants were defined for this study as older than the traditional applicant for graduate school. For operational purposes, older students were applicants over age 30, or those who received their baccalaurette degree eight or more years ago.

The data for this phase was based on background questionnnaires completed between October 1975 and September 1976. During that period more than 355,000 individuals registered the aptitute test or an advanced examination. There are 277,831 cases in this study, which represents neither the total population nor a random sample. The response rate, depending on the question, ranges from 75 to 82 percent.

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There are some limitations on the data, for example, not all graduate schools require the examination, not all students completed all questions, respondants may not be typical of all graduate school applicants, etc. Nonetheless, the GRE provides a valuable source of information to investigate some of the characteristics of older graduate students.

About 15 percent of the individuals in the data set for this period were over thirty (some 37,000 students) yet only about half of these individuals received their BA degree in 1967 or before. This 15 percent figure has remained relatively constant over the last five years. These older applicants differed from younger students in several respects:

1. There are more women than men in the older group.
2. Older applicants were more likely to have previously attended graduate school.
3. Older applicants are less likely to be undecided about their field of graduate study.
4. Older applicants are more likely to select career oriented fields that offer job opportunitites than younger students.

This data tends to confirm the suspected tendency of women pursuing (or returning to) graduate studies after interrupting their educational careers for marriage, raising a family or supporting husbands in their graduate studies.

Older students seem to receive somewhat lower GRE aptitude scores than younger applicants. Quantitative scores are more noticably lower than verbal. It should be emphasized that this does not mean that age causes lower test scores. Variables such as sex and the fields chosen by the candidates also influence test scores, when field is held constant between men and women at different ages. We did not examine ethnicity

and test scores, although a cursory review suggests that the performance of various ethnic groups on the GRE is comparable to performance on other standardized tests.

The second phase of the study sought to determine perceptions of graduate school departments regarding older students and review their procedures for making admissions decisions. Our interviews concentrated on schools located in or around Washington, D. C.; Los Angeles, California; Boston, Mass.; and Chicago, Illinois. We sought interviews with individuals in fields on departments where, according to the first phase, older students were most likely to enroll (i.e. education, business, public administration, library science, nursing, etc.). We also spoke with individuals in fields (i.e. physical sciences) where older applicants were not likely to be found. In all, about 50 interviews were conducted.

According to our interviews, graduate departments tend to fall into one of three categories with respect to their treatment of older applicants: type 1, type 2 and type 3.

Type I . Departments have never had large numbers of older applicants and have not noticed a recent increase. These were frequently highly selective departments with very competitive admissions.

Type II . Departments have traditionally received applications from older students and have not noticed an appreciable increase in recent years. Type II departments often include fields such as education and library science.

Type III . Departments have noticed an increase in the number of older applicants. Several of these departments had not noticed an increase until we inquired.

There was considerable agreement among all three types of departments that the traditional admissions requirements (transcripts, letters, and test scores) ill serve the older applicant. Test scores may not be accurate reflections of a candidate's true ability, especially if they have been taken after several years away from an academic setting. Transcripts do not reflect recent grade inflation and the grade point averages of older applicants may not compare favorably with younger students. Finally, older applicants may have difficulty obtaining recommendations from faculty members who had them for courses several years ago. Although some departments accept letters of recommendation from employers or friends, many departments are unwilling to accept such letters.

Despite these difficulties, we found few departments that had experimented with alternative methods to select graduate students. The most popular innovation seemed to be increased reliance on a personal statement prepared by the candidate. The problem with these, however, was that the departments using them found they were either very good or very bad. Those institutions that had experimented with other elements in the admissions process, however, seemed motivated more by a dissatisfaction with the traditional admissions criteria than a desire to help older students.

In short, our interviews turned up few departments that had identified older students as a "special need" target group in their admissions process, despite a realization that these students are not well served by the traditional criteria. Although older students made up 15 percent of the total, they tended to concentrate in certain fields where they were likely to compose more than 15 percent of the applicant pool.

In other fields, older applicants constitute an infintesimal percentage of the applicants.

In addition, graduate faculty members who make admissions decisions tend to serve on admissions committees on a rotating basis, so that their perceptions about the nature of the applicant pool may be lost on faculty members who serve after them. At several institutions we felt individuals discussed our study with a detached, almost academic concern.

In short, the questions related to admission of older students have not yet become a central issue to the graduate schools where we conducted interviews.